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NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

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## The Tao of Nelson

*Tao invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone*

*Clay is molded to form a vessel,  
But it is on its non-being that the usefulness of the utensil depends  
Doors and windows are cut to make a room,  
but it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends*

*- Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*

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### A New Discovery

The genius and success of Napoleon provided the fruit for two of history's premier military strategists, Jomini and Clausewitz. Observing the decisive way in which Napoleon crushed his opponents, they wrote of the power of national warfare, where entire nations are mobilized. While Clausewitz's approach to war was more sophisticated than Jomini's, the thrust of their argument was that victory lay in the direct armed assault, culminating in a decisive battle. Meanwhile, both before and after Napoleon, another view of strategy was articulated in China in 500 B.C. and in Britain in 1954. Called the 'indirect approach,' it is rarely used to describe the strategy of the Napoleonic Wars.

A recent discovery in England may change all that. During the most recent overhaul of *HMS Victory* in the Portsmouth Dockyards, a leather pouch was discovered in an outboard concealed cabinet in Nelson's quarters. This pouch contained original documents from the Napoleonic Wars that shed new light on British strategy in her war against Napoleon. These documents show a deliberate and sophisticated application of the principles of the indirect approach. They show that the strategy of the indirect approach was foremost in the minds of the British leadership from the start. Furthermore, they suggest that the British also had a more advanced, structured approach to military strategy than previously understood.<sup>1</sup>

### A Review of the Archives

They are mainly top secret naval messages. The subjects include outlines of national and military strategic objectives, employment orders, and status reports from individual ships back to the Admiralty. Most significantly, they reveal the presence of two previously unknown actors, a Chinese military strategist who directly aided the British, and a French spy in Napoleon's *Grand*

*Armee* who provided critical insights which aided British leaders throughout the war. As these documents speak best for themselves, they will be quoted directly in chronological order, with only brief commentary provided to highlight a point when necessary. The first message is from the Admiralty to the fleet, outlining the national and military strategy for the war.

17 MAY 1803 – TOP SECRET

FROM LITTLEHEART, ADMIRALTY BOARD  
TO ALL ADMIRALS OF HIS MAJESTY'S FLEET  
SUBJ: WAR PLANS

- 1 THE COLLAPSE OF THE PEACE OF AMIENS PUTS THE CROWN AT WAR AGAINST NAPOLEON ONCE AGAIN. I TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO OUTLINE OUR POLITICAL AND MILITARY OBJECTIVES AND TO EMPHASIZE THE CRITICAL ROLE OF THE FLEET.
2. OUR POLITICAL PRIORITIES HAVE CHANGED LITTLE SINCE THE WARS OF REVOLUTION THAT ENDED JUST TWO YEARS AGO. WE MUST ABOVE ALL PREVENT AN INVASION OF THE BRITISH ISLES. WE MUST NEXT PROTECT OUR COLONIAL HOLDINGS, PRESERVING OUR EMPIRE THAT IS OUR LIFE-BLOOD FOR TRADE AND PROSPERITY. FINALLY, WE MUST DO WHAT WE CAN TO PREVENT A FRENCH REPUBLIC THAT IS DOMINANT ON THE CONTINENT. THIS IMBALANCE WOULD HANG A SWORD OVER THE HEAD OF THE EMPIRE.
- 3 OUR MILITARY STRATEGY MUST TAKE INTO ACCOUNT SOME DEFINING CAPABILITIES AND VULNERABILITIES. (1) OUR STRENGTH LIES IN OUR FLEET, WHICH YOU HAVE ALL GIVEN YOUR LIVES TO BUILD. THIS MIGHT IS EVIDENCED IN TWO WAYS. MILITARY STRENGTH FROM OUR SHIPS OF THE LINE AND MARITIME ECONOMIC STRENGTH, WHICH STEMS FROM OUR COLONIES. (2) OUR WEAKNESS LIES IN OUR DETACHED GEOGRAPHY AND RELATIVELY SMALL ARMY, MUCH OF WHICH IS DEPLOYED TO PROTECT THE COLONIES. IN LIGHT OF THESE LIMITATIONS, A DIRECT ASSAULT ON THE CONTINENT AGAINST NAPOLEON WOULD BE CRUSHED.
- 4 OUR MILITARY STRATEGY WILL THUS EMPLOY A SUBTLE, INDIRECT APPROACH TO ACHIEVE OUR ENDS. WE WILL EMPLOY OUR TWO PRIMARY TOOLS. THE MILITARY STRENGTH OF OUR FLEET TO ATTACK NAPOLEON WHERE HE IS WEAK AND THE MARITIME STRENGTH OF OUR ECONOMY TO ENCOURAGE AND SUBSIDIZE OUR ALLIES. OUR ULTIMATE GOAL WILL BE TO FUND AND ENTICE OUR ALLIES TO FIGHT FOR OUR CAUSE WITH THEIR TROOPS. WE WILL AVOID A DIRECT CONFLICT INVOLVING THE MAIN BODY OF HIS MAJESTY'S ARMY. THIS WILL REQUIRE DIPLOMATIC SKILL OF THE HIGHEST ORDER, AND WE HAVE DISPATCHED ENVOYS TO ALL CONTINENTAL CAPITALS. WE WILL, THROUGH SKILLFUL EMPLOYMENT OF STRENGTH, TRADE, AND PERSUASION, ATTACK THE FRENCHMAN WHERE HE LEAST EXPECTS. OUR FIRST OBJECTIVE MUST BE TO DISLODGE HIM FROM BOULOGNE WHERE HE HAS MASSED 200,000 TROOPS AND POSES AN IMMEDIATE INVASION THREAT.
5. TO INVADE ENGLAND, ONE MUST CONTROL THE CHANNEL. THE FLEET'S MISSION WILL BE TO PREVENT A CONCENTRATION OF THE FRENCH NAVY THAT COULD SUPPORT INVASION BY THE ARMY, WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY MOVING NAPOLEON AWAY FROM THE BRITISH COAST. THE ARMY WILL NOT ENGAGE IN DIRECT ATTACK, DEPLOYING ONLY WHEN AND WHERE NECESSARY TO SUPPORT DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS AND DEMONSTRATE OUR

COMMITMENT TO OUR ALLIES OUR FLEET WILL DIVIDE ITSELF ADMIRAL CORNWALLIS WILL COMMAND THE HOME DEFENSE FLEET IN THE ATLANTIC. YOU ARE TO BLOCKADE THE ENEMY IN THEIR PORTS AND AT ALL COSTS PREVENT A CONCENTRATION OF THE FRENCH FLEET IN THE ENGLISH CHANNEL. ADMIRAL NELSON WILL COMMAND THE MEDITERRANEAN FLEET ALSO USING BLOCKADE, PREVENT THE FRENCH FLEET STATIONED IN THE MEDITERRANEAN FROM MASSING WITH THEIR ATLANTIC FLEET YOUR ASSIGNMENT THERE IS NO COINCIDENCE YOU TROUNCED THE FRENCH COMMANDER, ADMIRAL VILLENEUVE, AT ABOUKIR BAY ON THE NILE. HE CANNOT HAVE FORGOTTEN YOU HOLD A CONSIDERABLE SPIRITUAL EDGE, WHICH YOU ARE TO EXPLOIT.

6. SHOULD THE FRENCH ATTEMPT TO BREAK THE BLOCKADE AND LEAVE PORT, THEY ARE TO BE ENGAGED WITH ALL FURY GODSPEED.

This message makes it clear that the indirect approach was in the minds of British planners from the beginning Next we have two messages which introduce previously unknown players in the war. The first message is a secret communiqué from a British spy deep inside Napoleon's command It outlines Napoleon's naval strategy and confirms that British fears of invasion were well founded The second message, from the Admiralty, notes the entry of Spain into the war against Britain and shows how the spy influenced British naval orders Just as significant, it mentions for the first time an obscure Chinese military advisor who is dispatched to assist Lord Nelson First, the spy's handwritten note is quoted below

*27 March 1805*

*From Lauriston,*

*I have finally learned the essence of Napoleon's strategy, and summarize it below I will continue to try and place myself in the midst of these developments*

*Napoleon's orders to his fleet*

- *The Brest fleet (Admiral Gaunteaume, 27 ships), and the Toulon fleet (Admiral Villeneuve, 17 ships) will escape their blockades, free the ships in Ferrol and Cadiz respectively, and proceed to Martinique to rendezvous All other French warships will also sail to Martinique to join this fleet*
- *During this initial massing phase, no battle with the British fleet is permitted – they must arrive intact in Martinique Fleets sailing for the West Indies will attempt to draw Cornwallis's Atlantic fleet across with you, weakening the defenses around Britain*
- *Once assembled in Martinique, the combined fleet, under Villeneuve's command, will sail for the channel to defeat the British fleet and support an invasion from Bolougne This is a dangerous plan May God help you defeat this insane man*

The Admiralty's next message to the fleet clearly incorporates this information, directing the Atlantic Fleet to maintain station. Also, the Chinese advisor is assigned to Nelson.

5 APRIL 1805 – TOP SECRET

FROM. LITTLEHEART, H M. ADMIRALTY BOARD

TO ALL ADMIRALS OF HIS MAJESTY'S FLEET

SUBJ: SPAIN ENTERS WAR FOR FRANCE – STAY THE COURSE<sup>1</sup>

- 1 AS OF LATE LAST YEAR, SPAIN HAS ENTERED THE WAR ON THE FRENCH SIDE. THEIR SHIPS WILL NOW BE CONSIDERED ENEMIES OF THE CROWN THE SPANISH FLEET ADDS 32 SHIPS OF THE LINE TO AN ALREADY CAPABLE FRENCH FLEET<sup>2</sup>
- 2 THIS DEVELOPMENT IN NO WAY ALTERS OUR PRIORTIES KEEP THE ENEMY DIVIDED KEEP YOUR BLOCKADES TIGHT SHOULD THE ENEMY BREAK THE BLOCKADE, IT IS MOST IMPERATIVE THAT THE ATLANTIC DEFENSE FLEET KEEPS STATION NELSON'S FLEET WILL RESPOND FROM THE MEDITERREANEAN TO ANY CONTINGENCY
- 3 CONCERNING OTHER MATTERS, CONSISTENT WITH OUR STRATEGY OF ATTACKING THE FRENCH INDIRECTLY, WE ARE PURSUING A DIPLOMATIC COALITION WITH RUSSIA, PRUSSIA, AND AUSTRIA IN THE HOPES THAT THEY WILL JOIN THE WAR AGAINST FRANCE TO THIS END, WE WILL CONSIDER DEPLOYING 10,000 TROOPS TO HANOVER, LESS AS A FIGHTING FORCE THAN AN ATTEMPT TO AROUSE PRUSSIA TO ENTER THE WAR (WE ARE ALSO AGREEING TO FUND 200,000 PRUSSIAN TROOPS TO PUSH THIS EFFORT)<sup>3</sup> 5000 OF THE TROOPS STATIONED IN MALTA AND SICILY MAY ALSO BE DEPLOYED TO THE CONTINENT SHOULD A COALITION ARMY BE FORMED.
4. LORD NELSON YOU HAVE THE LION'S SHARE OF THE CHALLENGE AS THE MEDITERRANEAN IS THE MORE DIFFICULT ENVIRONMENT YOU HAVE BEEN CONTINUALLY AT SEA FOR EIGHTEEN MONTHS ACCORDINGLY, TO ASSIST YOU I AM DISPATCHING ONE SUN-TZU TO YOUR COMMAND HE IS AN EXPERT IN THE INDIRECT EMPLOYMENT OF FORCES TO FRUSTRATE THE ENEMY HE IS A TACITURN FELLOW, BUT I ENCOURAGE YOU TO KEEP HIM CLOSE AT YOUR SIDE, AS KING ARTHUR DID MERLIN HIS WORDS, THOUGH FEW, SPEAK VOLUMES GODSPEED

As we see in these early messages, the British not only committed to the indirect approach early in the war, but persevered in this plan despite the entry of Spain against them, and despite significant pressure from the Continental powers to commit large numbers of troops. Instead, British troops were committed in small numbers, only to support their diplomatic goal. to get other countries to commit their troops to fight Napoleon. Throughout the war, troop deployments were made to southern Italy (4000 troops in 1805-6 who retreated to Sicily without engaging the enemy);<sup>4</sup> to Hanover (25,000 troops in 1805-6 who returned to England without

having fired a shot in anger),<sup>5</sup> to Copenhagen, Denmark (18,000 men in 1807, who captured the Danish fleet and all naval supplies in the harbor),<sup>6</sup> and Walcheran, Belgium (32,000 troops in 1809. Of 4000 casualties, 3000 came from fever—this expedition returned to England after two months with 5500 prisoners)<sup>7</sup> None of these troops met the brunt of Napoleon's army. They were all deployed to support coalitions or to nip at the periphery of Europe. Casualties in battle were negligible. These deployments are completely consistent with the indirect approach.

As the last message shows, the British were also willing to pay other nations to raise and outfit their troops towards the goal of getting the Allies to do the bulk of the fighting. The British were resolved to sticking to the indirect approach—they never stray from this strategy.

Now we will focus on Nelson's tactics against the French, and see, through a series of messages, Sun-Tzu's impact on the Trafalgar campaign. Even at the tactical level, the indirect approach is employed. The next messages are taken in sequence, as Nelson reports to the Admiralty about the progress of the campaign.

15 APRIL 1805

FROM. NELSON AND BRONTE

TO LITTLEHEART, ADMIRALTY BOARD

SUBJ. CHANGE IN BLOCKADE STRATEGY

1. THIS CHINAMAN IS A FASCINATING FELLOW WHO HAS CAUSED EVEN ME TO RETHINK MY TACTICS. UPON REPORTING ABOARD, HE SET ABOUT IN HIS QUIET BUT UNBASHFUL WAY TO ASSESS THE SITUATION. I ASKED HIM OUTRIGHT TO SUMMARIZE OUR SITUATION. SUN-TZU SAID "YOUR FIRST LORD IS WISE. THE BLOCKADE ATTACKS THE ENEMY'S STRATEGY TO CONCENTRATE FORCE AND CONTROL CHANNEL. THIS IS MOST IMPORTANT IN WAR."<sup>8</sup>
2. REGARDING THE BLOCKADE, HE STATED "HE WHO IS PRUDENT AND LIES IN WAIT FOR AN ENEMY WHO IS NOT, WILL BE VICTORIOUS."<sup>9</sup> HOWEVER, YOUR BLOCKADE CAN BE IMPROVED. THOSE SKILLED IN COMMAND BRING THE ENEMY TO THE BATTLEFIELD AND ARE NOT BROUGHT THERE BY HIM.<sup>10</sup> VILLENEUVE WILL NOT COME OUT IF HE SEES YOU. SO, ALTHOUGH YOU ARE NEAR, MAKE IT APPEAR YOU ARE FAR AWAY. OFFER THE ENEMY A BAIT AND LURE HIM.<sup>11</sup> GIVE THE FRENCH THE IMPRESSION THEY CAN COME OUT SAFELY, THEN STRIKE THEM." AS OUR CONVERSATION WENT ON, WE DEVELOPED A SYSTEM OF 'LOOSE' BLOCKADE, WHEREBY CLOSE SURVEILLANCE OF THE ENEMY HARBOR IS MAINTAINED BY ONE OR TWO FRIGATES, WHILE THE MAIN BODY OF MY FIGHTING FLEET REMAINS OVER THE HORIZON AND OUT OF SIGHT OF THE

ENEMY IN THIS WAY, WE ENDEAVOR TO CONFUSE THE ENEMY AND LURE HIM OUT TO SEA WHERE WE CAN MEET HIM

3. SUN-TZU WAS AGAIN CRUCIAL IN MASTERING THE DETAILS SUN-TZU SAID "TO CONTROL MANY IS THE SAME AS TO CONTROL A FEW THIS IS A MATTER OF FORMATION AND SIGNALS"<sup>12</sup> NO CHINESE GENERAL CAN PROPOSE TO LECTURE AN ADMIRAL OF HIS MAJESTY'S FLEET ABOUT FORMATIONS, BUT HIS COMMENT INSPIRED ME TO EMPLOY THE NEW SIGNAL BOOK TO GIVE THE FRIGATE A MEANS OF COMMUNICATING THE ENEMY'S MOVEMENTS BY EMPLOYING A 'CHAIN' OF SIGNALLING FRIGATES, MY MAIN BATTLE FLEET CAN STAY 100 OR MORE MILES AWAY AND KNOW THE ENEMY'S MOVES, MEANWHILE THE ENEMY IS BLIND TO MY DISPOSITION I AM GREATLY ENJOYING MY CONFUCIAN ADVISOR, HE IS EARNING MY TRUST AND RESPECT VR, ETC , ETC

Nobody who reads this cable can deny the role that the indirect approach, as articulated by Nelson and Sun-Tzu, played in developing the loose blockade, designed to give the enemy a false sense of security so that he will leave port<sup>13</sup> Long considered a tactical stroke of genius, it worked superbly—even as the message was being written, Villeneuve was underway Some lucky intelligence from a passing merchantman allowed him to slip by Nelson's fleet at Barcelona Once free, he executed Napoleon's orders and proceeded to the West Indies Nelson, frustrated that he had missed the chance for battle, took up hot pursuit. The next message we have is Nelson's report from the West Indies after he chased Villeneuve down. It clearly shows that he and Sun-Tzu took full advantage of the Atlantic transit to pressure the French admiral

7 JUNE 1805

FROM: NELSON AND BRONTE

TO: LITTLEHEART, ADMIRALTY BOARD

SUBJ: REPORT FROM BARBADOS

I HAVE ARRIVED AT BARBADOS, AND SEEK OUT THE COMBINED FLEET WITH THE AIM OF DESTROYING IT RODNEY'S ACTION OF 1782 WILL PALE NEXT TO THE DESTRUCTION I WILL BRING REGARDING MISSING VILLENEUVE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, IT MAY BE THOUGHT THAT I PROTECTED TOO WELL SARDINIA, NAPLES, SICILY, AND EGYPT FROM THE FRENCH,<sup>14</sup> BUT THAT IS PAST DURING THE CHASE, I SPARED NO EFFORT TO DRILL MY FLEET AND GAIN AS MUCH AS TIME POSSIBLE. SUN-TZU HAS ENCOURAGED ME. "KEEP YOUR ENEMY UNDER STRAIN AND WEAR HIM DOWN"<sup>15</sup> IF YOU SAY WHICH RULER POSSESSES MORAL INFLUENCE, WHICH COMMANDER IS MORE ABLE. .WHICH HAS THE BETTER TRAINED OFFICERS AND MEN .I WILL BE ABLE TO FORECAST WHICH SIDE WILL BE VICTORIOUS AND WHICH DEFEATED "<sup>16</sup> I KNOW THAT MY MEN ARE MORE THAN A MATCH FOR THE COMBINED FLEET SUN-TZU ALSO SAID, "A NAVY MAY BE ROBBED OF ITS SPIRIT AND ITS COMMANDER

DEPRIVED OF HIS COURAGE. AN EXPERT AT CONTROLLING HIS ENEMY FRUSTRATES HIM AND MOVES AGAINST HIM ”<sup>17</sup> I KNOW THAT MY ARRIVAL SO SOON IN THESE WATERS WILL UNHINGE VILLENEUVE I AM OUTNUMBERED, BUT POWERFUL AS THEIR FORCE MAY BE, MINE IS COMPACT—THEIRS MUST BE UNWIELDY, AND ALTHOUGH A VERY PRETTY FIDDLE, I DON’T BELIEVE THAT . VILLENEUVE KNOWS HOW TO PLAY UPON IT <sup>18</sup> IF WE MEET, I WILL FINISH THE BATTLE ON THE SEA THAT I HAVE ALREADY WON IN HIS SOUL VR, ETC., ETC

Nelson could not have imagined how successful he was Upon hearing that Nelson had made up ten day’s time and was in the West Indies, Villeneuve panicked and immediately fled for home without making rendezvous with any other French forces Napoleon’s naval plan had been frustrated at every level A communiqué from England’s spy expresses Napoleon’s outrage at his admirals This message is sent from Vigo, Spain after Villeneuve returned and was once again blockaded in port

*July 30 1805*

*From Lauriston*

*Napoleon is furious with his admirals, particularly the lily-livered Villeneuve No part of his plan has worked All admirals failed to break out of port on the prescribed dates Those that eventually escaped failed to rendezvous (Gaunteame never left Brest, “Where did my admirals learn they can make war without taking risks?”<sup>19</sup> he exploded Of Villeneuve, he said, “If he is not a ‘poltron de coeur,’ (moral coward) he is a ‘poltron de tete!’ (psychological coward) ”<sup>20</sup> Much of this circus was preordained by Napoleon himself You Englishmen no doubt see the original plan as the work of a self-confident amateur in naval warfare, the blindness of a great soldier to the essential differences between land and sea strategy <sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, his anger, combined with Nelson’s tactical skill and constant proximity, has unbalanced Villeneuve I was sent to inspect his fleet when it returned When he learned that Nelson beat him back to Europe, he visibly paled As I wrote to Napoleon “This squadron needs a man and above all an admiral who commands confidence and attachment The captains have no heart left to do well Discipline is utterly relaxed ”<sup>22</sup> He is beaten before having engaged I highly recommend you send Nelson against him at the soonest*

*On an unrelated note, I have been hearing talk of disturbances in Austria and Russia I only pray that this will turn into open resistance Napoleon is a madman*

Nelson’s dogged pressure as part of his tactics to break Villeneuve’s spirit had worked.

Without firing a shot, Nelson had outmaneuvered him, and ‘indirectly’ beat him. With respect to the disturbances to the east, they eventually solidified into the Third Coalition between Britain, Austria and Russia, a major triumph of the diplomatic efforts pursued as part of the British grand

strategy of indirect approach The next message from the Admiralty outlines the status of the war and promulgates new orders to the fleet

27 AUGUST 1805 – TOP SECRET

FROM LITTLEHEART, H.M. ADMIRALTY BOARD

TO ALL ADMIRALS OF HIS MAJESTY'S FLEET

SUBJ. STRATEGY PAYS OFF! ALLIANCE FORMED WITH AUSTRIA AND RUSSIA

- 1 BRITAIN, THROUGH HER DIPLOMATIC ARTISTRY AND SUBSTANTIAL MONETARY SUBSIDY, HAS PERSUADED RUSSIA AND AUSTRIA TO ENTER THE WAR THEY HAVE MASSED AN ARMY TO CHALLENGE NAPOLEON FROM EASTERN EUROPE, AND THE FRENCHMAN HAS MARCHED AWAY FROM BOULOGNE THIS IS A GLORIOUS DEVELOPMENT, AS THE IMMEDIATE THREAT OF INVASION IS RELIEVED WELL DONE TO ALL THE FLEET WHO MET THE CHALLENGE AND PREVENTED THE FRENCH FROM MASSING A FLEET TO FIGHT IN THE CHANNEL THE FINAL OUTCOME OF THIS WAR REMAINS TO BE SEEN, BUT FOR BRITAIN, IT MUST BE CONSIDERED A VALIDATION OF OUR INDIRECT APPROACH WE HAVE ACCOMPLISHED OUR TOP POLITICAL AND MILITARY PRIORITY WITHOUT A SINGLE ENGAGEMENT FURTHERMORE, WE HAVE GOT OUR ALLIES TO FIGHT NAPOLEON WITH THEIR TROOPS, JUST AS WE PLANNED WE ARE STILL AT WORK TRYING TO PERSUADE THE PRUSSIAN'S TO JOIN THE FRAY, BUT SO FAR TO NO AVAIL
2. WHILE THE BATTLE RAGES ON LAND IN THE EAST, WE MUST DO ALL WE CAN TO STRIKE THE COMBINED FRANCO-SPANISH FLEET AT SEA IN THE WEST AS LONG AS THE ENEMY FLEET EXISTS, IT CAN BE USED FOR INVASION IT MUST BE MET AND DESTROYED. OUR FLEET IS BETTER TRAINED, BETTER EQUIPPED, AND BETTER LED LURE THE ENEMY OUT TO SEA, AND ENGAGE! GODSPEED

Nelson's fleet took these orders to heart. As Napoleon's combined fleet tried to enter the Mediterranean to support the *Grand Armee* in Europe, they were met by Nelson's fleet off Cape Trafalgar, and destroyed The Admiralty's orders seem at first glance to urge a direct attack, but it must be remembered that Napoleon had abandoned his demoralized fleet on the western coast to fend for itself while he attacked to the east. For Britain, this is the perfect time to attack. Unknown until these new letters were discovered is that even during the Battle of Trafalgar, the indirect approach was always at play This is clearly stated in a message from Vice-Admiral Collingwood, who assumed Nelson's command after his death at Trafalgar

22 OCTOBER 1805 – TOP SECRET

FROM VICE-ADMIRAL COLLINGWOOD

TO. LITTLEHEART, H.M. ADMIRALTY BOARD

SUBJ VICTORY AT TRAFALGAR

1. SIR, YESTERDAY A BATTLE WAS FOUGHT BY HIS MAJESTY'S FLEET, WITH THE COMBINED FLEETS OF SPAIN AND FRANCE, AND A VICTORY GAINED, WHICH WILL STAND RECORDED AS ONE OF THE MOST BRILLIANT AND DECISIVE THAT EVER DISTINGUISHED THE BRITISH NAVY. AT FIVE P.M. SEVENTEEN OF THE ENEMY HAD SURRENDERED, AND ONE BURNT. THE FRENCH ADMIRAL VILLENEUVE IS NOW A PRISONER ON BOARD THE MARS. OUR LOSS HAS BEEN GREAT IN MEN, BUT WHAT IS IRREPARABLE, AND THE CAUSE OF UNIVERSAL LAMENTATION, IS THE DEATH OF THE NOBLE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, WHO DIED IN THE ARMS OF VICTORY.<sup>23</sup>
2. THE BATTLE PLAN WAS A TOTAL DEPARTURE FROM THE 'FIGHTING INSTRUCTIONS' OF THE ROYAL FLEET. RATHER THAN ENGAGE THE ENEMY IN A LINE OF SAIL, NELSON AND SUN-TZU HAD DEVELOPED A NEW APPROACH WHICH WOULD NOT PIT BROADSIDE AGAINST BROADSIDE, BUT WOULD RATHER ALLOW OUR FLEET TO DIVIDE THE FRENCH FLEET AND CONCENTRATE AGAINST THE ENEMY'S CENTER. SUN-TZU SAID "WHEN YOU ARE EQUALLY MATCHED, ENGAGE HIM."<sup>24</sup> WHEN HE IS UNITED, DIVIDE HIM."<sup>25</sup> NELSON WAS AFIRE WITH THESE THOUGHTS AS WELL. AFTER DESCRIBING HIS PLAN (I HAVE INCLUDED A COPY OF HIS DIAGRAMS FOR ILLUSTRATION), HE ASKED "WHAT DO YOU THINK OF IT?" WHEN WE HESITATED HE ANNOUNCED, "I'LL TELL YOU WHAT I THINK OF IT. I THINK IT WILL SURPRISE AND CONFOUND THE ENEMY. THEY WON'T KNOW WHAT I AM ABOUT."<sup>26</sup> THE MARGIN OF OUR VICTORY CONFIRMS HIS CONFIDENCE. MAY GOD REST HIS SOUL. I HAVE IMMERSSED HIS BODY IN THE FINEST BRANDY TILL WE RETURN TO LONDON FOR A PROPER FUNERAL.
3. REGARDING SUN-TZU, I REQUEST THAT HE STAY ON MY ADVISOR. VR, ETC., ETC.

The last message in the pouch, not worth listing separately, denies Collingwood's request to retain Sun-Tzu, stating that he has already been assigned to work with Wellesley (later the Duke of Wellington) to prepare British troops for a new type of campaign, expected to be launched on the Iberian Peninsula as soon as practicable.

Thus the wheels were set in motion. These hitherto undiscovered messages provide critical new insights, showing conclusively that the British consciously employed the strategy of indirect approach in their war against Napoleon, both at the national level and at the tactical level. This strategy was established early in the war, and was religiously followed until it ended in 1815. A brief survey of major events that occurred later in the war will confirm the validity of this statement.

The defeat of the French fleet at Trafalgar eliminated the possibility of invasion, but the British continued to use the strength of their navy, their maritime trade, and their diplomacy to achieve their ends without exhausting their means. After Trafalgar, several key events contributed to defeating Napoleon, each an example of British indirectness. For example:

- 1806 Napoleon declares a European trade embargo against Britain, the Continental System.

To counter, the British employ the strength of their fleet to develop and exploit 'leaks' in the system—in Russia (through their control of the Baltic Sea), the Iberian Peninsula (through Spanish and Portuguese harbors) and the Mediterranean (employing their bases in Malta, Sicily, and Gibraltar). British maritime strength defeated Napoleon's indirect strategy of embargo – an example of an indirect parry deflecting an indirect blow.

- 1808. British forces invade Portugal and Spain. This indirect assault was against a very vulnerable point, and on a *peninsula* surrounded on three sides by water so it was easily accessible for the fleet. This Peninsular Campaign, the only one during the war where Britain committed substantial numbers of troops to combat, could not have been conducted without constant support from the fleet to re-supply and reinforce the army. In one case, 250 transports and a squadron of warships evacuated General Sir John Moore's retreating army at La Corunna before the French crushed it against the sea. Tactically, like Nelson, Wellington conducted a war of indirect assault on the Peninsula (alluded to by the assignment of Sun-Tzu as Wellington's advisor). Napoleon never cured this 'Spanish ulcer'.

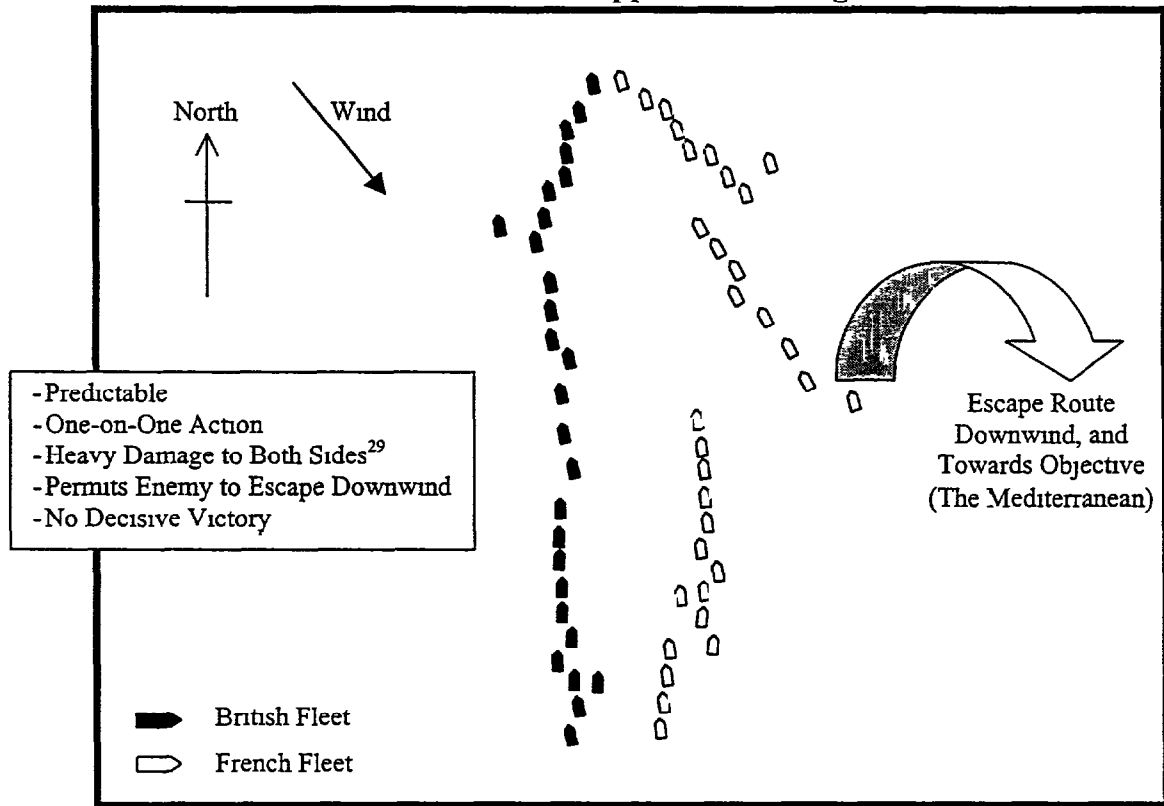
- 1809-1811 The British use the fleet again in an indirect assault on French and Dutch colonies around the world. After Trafalgar, the British seized the colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Eustatius, and St. Martin in the West Indies; Mauritius, the Dutch East Indies, and the Cape of Good Hope. This not only strengthened their economy, but also

allowed the British to recall some of the troops and warships that were defending British colonies in these regions against French attack. These forces were used to support the Peninsula Campaign. It also significantly reduced the interruption of British trade by French raiders. Significantly, all these operations were ordered on the precondition that no heavy losses be suffered. The British suffered just over 1000 casualties for all colonial seizures combined.<sup>27</sup> By capturing these remote colonies during the war, the British clearly kept the peace in mind—specifically looking towards a bigger empire in that peace.

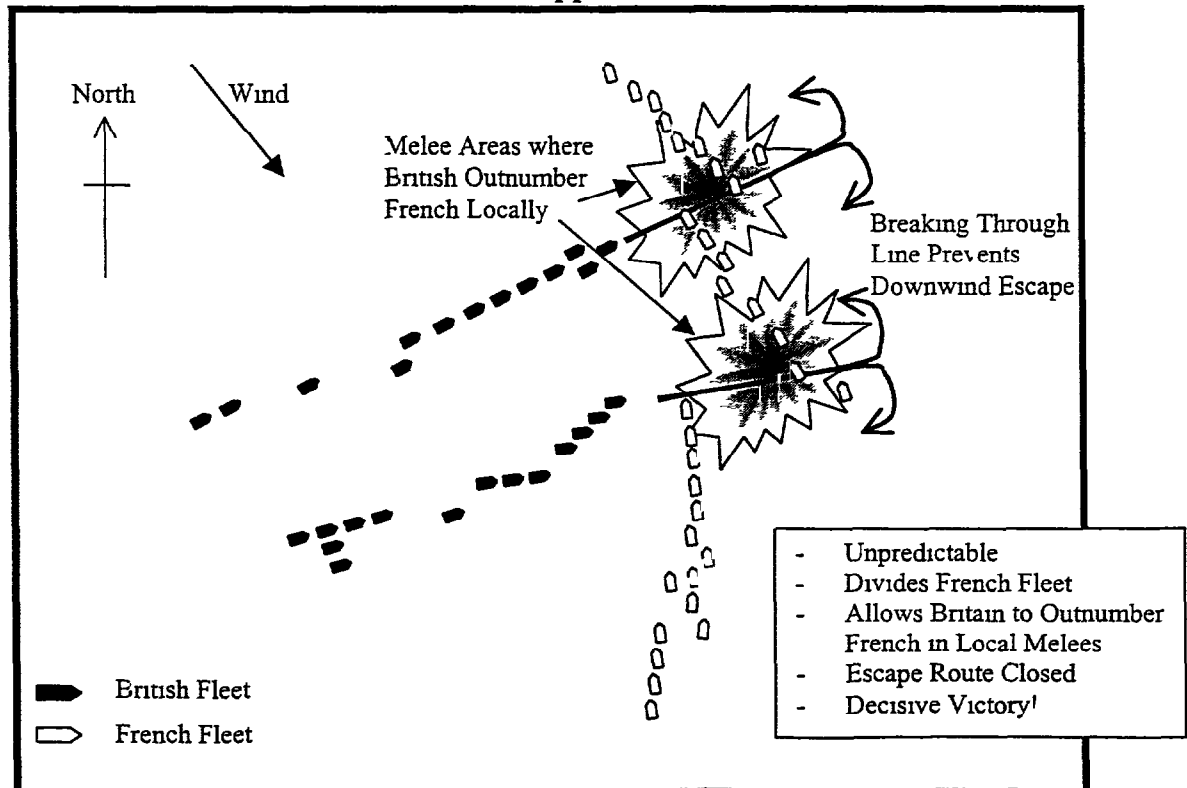
- 1812. In perhaps the greatest indirect diplomatic victory, the British compel the Russians to break with the French and defy the Continental System. Napoleon was so enraged that he committed tremendous men and energy to an invasion of Russia. This turned out to be the breaking point for the French army, which never defeated Russia, and never recovered. British troop commitments in Russia were negligible, and the deployment of French forces to Russia enabled even greater successes in Portugal and Spain.

These examples show a commitment to the indirect approach throughout the war, which was largely enabled by the continued British mastery of the high seas. It is no wonder that, as Napoleon was being delivered to his exile by the British ship *HMS Bellerophon*, which had seen distinguished action at Trafalgar, he was fascinated by the ship and crew, and had Nelson's biography read to him. "In all my plans," he said, "I have always been thwarted by the British Fleet."<sup>28</sup> Although the Napoleonic Wars are rarely identified with the indirect approach, I think that these new archives show that in actual conduct, the British adhered strictly to these principles. It is now so clear, it is almost as if Liddell-Hart was actually there directing events.

## Trafalgar - Had It Been Fought per the Fighting Instructions The Direct Approach - Cheng



## Trafalgar - As It Was Fought - The "Nelson Touch" The Indirect Approach - Ch'i



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<sup>1</sup> Author's note This paper itself takes an indirect approach to making the point that British strategy during the Napoleonic Wars is an excellent example of the strategy of indirect approach as defined by B H Liddell-Hart at the national strategic level and Sun-Tzu at the tactical level Furthermore, the use of the British Fleet was paramount to executing this strategy To show this, I have created a simple historical fiction centered on an artificial assumption that British planners during the war consciously employed the indirect approach As "evidence," I have constructed several fictional messages from the period, each of which points out a different aspect of the strategy at play during the war Some of the characters mentioned in these messages (the Admiralty, a British Spy, and Sun-Tzu) are also obviously fictional constructs It is important to note that while the messages and some characters are fictional, the wartime events they describe, some of the content of the messages, and the application of the strategic principles are all factual All wartime data is real, and sources are cited where appropriate When messages use actual citations from period correspondence, the source is again cited The intent is to create a fictional framework to illustrate the factual evidence that supports my thesis, not to create a work of total fiction

<sup>2</sup> Warner, Oliver, Nelson's Battles, United States Naval Institute, Annapolis, Md , 1965, p 154

<sup>3</sup> Hall, Christopher D , British Strategy in the Napoleonic War 1803-1815, Manchester University Press, Manchester, UK, 1992, p 120

<sup>4</sup> Ibid , p 117

<sup>5</sup> Ibid , p 122

<sup>6</sup> Brownlee, Walter, The Navy that Beat Napoleon, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1980, p 44

<sup>7</sup> Ibid , p 45

<sup>8</sup> Sun-Tzu, The Art of War, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1963, p 77

<sup>9</sup> Sun-Tzu, p 83

<sup>10</sup> Sun-Tzu, p 96

<sup>11</sup> Sun-Tzu, p 66

<sup>12</sup> Sun-Tzu, p 90

<sup>13</sup> In developing the 'loose blockade' strategy, Nelson foreshadowed the same strategy that would be used in World War I as the British Grand Fleet attempted to lure the German High seas Fleet out or port to engage them

<sup>14</sup> "It may be from the French" is excerpted from an actual message from Nelson to Hugh Elliot, British Minister at Naples, on 18 April before Nelson left the Mediterranean in pursuit of Villeneuve It is quoted from Keegan, John, The Price of Admiralty, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 1988 p 21 The sentiment that Nelson had missed the chance for battle while protecting these British colonies emphasizes the importance of maintaining the interests of the empire, particularly those maritime strategic points in the Mediterranean which were vital to sustaining indirect pressure against Napoleon from the south, away from the British Isles

<sup>15</sup> Sun-Tzu, p 68

<sup>16</sup> Sun-Tzu, p 65-66

<sup>17</sup> Sun-Tzu, p 108

<sup>18</sup> "But powerful play upon it " excerpted from a message from Nelson to the Governor of Barbados as quoted in Warner, Nelson's Battles, p 166

<sup>19</sup> Napoleon, as quoted in Keegan, Price of Admiralty, p 27

<sup>20</sup> Napoleon as quoted in Keegan, p 30

<sup>21</sup> "work of a self-confident . sea strategy " from Sir Julian Corbett, as quoted in Warner, p 157

<sup>22</sup> Excerpted from a letter from General Lauriston to Napoleon, written on 22 August 1805, as quoted in Keegan, p 32

<sup>23</sup> "Sir, arms of Victory " is excerpted from an actual letter from Vice-Admiral Collingwood to General Fox, Governor of the Rock of Gibraltar

<sup>24</sup> Sun-Tzu, p 80

<sup>25</sup> Sun-Tzu, p 69

<sup>26</sup> "I'll tell you I am about " From the memoirs of Captain Keets relating a conversation with Nelson about his battle plan for Trafalgar, as quoted in Warner, Nelson's Battles, p 172 Deviating from the 'Fighting Instructions' of the Royal Navy was an offense punishable by death In light of this, compare Nelson's commitment to a new attack formation, to surprise and confuse the enemy, with Sun-Tzu's emphasis on surprise and deception In actuality, the two were very alike in this regard

<sup>27</sup> Casualty figures from Hall, British Strategy pp 184-189

<sup>28</sup> Warner, Nelson's Battles, p 241

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<sup>29</sup> The Fighting Instructions dictated that the fleet take position in a line of sail parallel to and close aboard the enemy. This resulted in an engagement in which intense firepower was exchanged at close range. Both sides inflicted heavy damage on the other, and although there was a victor, there was no real winner. It is the direct approach exactly, and bears remarkable similarities to the situation that emerged more than 100 years later in WWI, where the forces were locked together along the Maginot Line. Nelson's tactical genius in solving this situation with the indirect approach foreshadowed the work of Liddell-Hart in solving the problems seen in WWI by stressing maneuver.